

THE FIRST SECRETARY

By DEMETRA and KENNETH BROWN

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A Friend in Need

ON the way to the Mavrocorthato house, Weir's greatest anxiety was to hear of Rhasneh, and his mind was immeasurably relieved to learn that her slave had called a few days before.

"She came to see Xeny," madame explained; "but the child was too ill to receive her; and so I sent Hanum Rhasneh a little gift of flowers by the slave."

"Then you think she returned to Therapia?" Weir asked, eagerly trying to reassure himself.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," said Madame Mavrocorthato, wondering if his recent suffering in jail might not have affected the man's reason.

"I beg your pardon," said Weir suddenly, realizing that she could know nothing of his romance. He would have told her everything if they had not at that moment reached the house.

"Your kindness to me may lead you into difficulties," he added as he helped her to alight. "I am going to ask you to give me further assistance."

"You know you may count on my help," madame replied. "Come and confess after you have been to your hotel."

Weir had been so preoccupied that he had scarcely given a thought to his appearance. But now he laughed outright at the sight of his disheveled clothing, and praised Madame Mavrocorthato's courage for not having abandoned him the moment they were out of sight of the jail.

"It is as well I rescued you before I had a good look at you," she said good naturedly, "or I might have left you to your fate. However, come back and lunch with us."

It was with some difficulty that Weir convinced the people at his hotel that he was not an impostor, and then he was plied with questions concerning his disappearance. The legation was notified of his return; but except to assure his colleagues and the Blakes of his safety he offered no explanation.

For a quarter of an hour after Weir went into his bath the heavenly sense of returning cleanliness sufficed him. Then his mind went to Rhasneh, and the thought of her fate again took possession of him. But Madame Mavrocorthato had reassured him, and he felt certain that after failing to find him she had returned to her home. He had made up his mind to confide everything to this sympathetic Greek woman, and to ask her advice and help, having failed so lamentably himself.

Mavrocorthato was to lunch at his club; but he laughingly offered to chaperon his wife and Weir at a distance. In appearance, it was quite a different Weir who called at the Mavrocorthato home at the appointed hour.

"And now, monsieur, tell me all about it," madame said when the two were at table.

The food caused Weir to breathe a sigh of wonderful content. His excitement at his escape and the pleasure of a warm bath had prevented him from realizing how much he had needed food. And so much courage had his dinner given him that he felt capable of tackling the whole Ottoman Empire single handed.

"There seems to be some amiable gentleman in this country who has a prejudice against me," he said.

"A prejudice!" madame repeated. "But all foreigners must expect that."

"Yes, but he carries it rather far. Twice a boat rammed mine, earlier in the season at Therapia, and a man tried to knock me overboard with an oar once."

"Monsieur, that is more than a prejudice, that is a dislike."

"Perhaps it is," Weir assented gravely. "Anyway, a week ago they got me. I hired two boatmen to row me to Therapia, and on the way home, under the Bridge of Galata, they upset the boat and tried to drown me, besides stabbing me with a knife."

"Oh, Monsieur Weir—you were both drowned and stabbed!"

"Yes; versatile beggars, weren't they? Luckily the stab was only a glancing one."

"But didn't anybody see them, and catch them?"

"N-no. The fact is, it was pretty late at night—nearly morning, to tell the truth."

"Oh!" madame exclaimed, and there was a subtle change of inflection to her voice. After a pause, which had in it an element of embarrassment for

its normal place in his life, madame continued, with a certain brilliance in her eyes:

"And now?"

"Now what?" he asked.

"Therapia—murdering boatmen—what did you call them—'versatile beggars'—and all the rest?"

"It's quite simple," Weir answered her. "There is a Turkish girl whom I wish to marry. I had been to see her that night in her palace in Therapia; and I think the boatmen must have been substituted for mine by her father or Haleb Bey—the chap they wanted her to marry, you know."

"Haleb Bey!" Madame Mavrocorthato gasped, not because the name had any greater significance than any other part of what Weir had been telling her, but because she had to gasp somewhere at this laconic revelation.

"Yes, do you know him?"

"I know of him; but it wasn't that. Oh, you Americans!" she cried with half real despair, while in her mind the little romance she had built on Xeny's likeness to Chrysanthi melted away into an unshed tear or two. "And this is the powder magazine in which you have been smoking your cigarette so calmly for weeks! And the young lady is—"

Weir spelled it out; for even the best of servants sometimes have ears.

"I thought so," madame said thoughtfully. "Her father is one of the most powerful men in the kingdom," she added.

"Well, he's an amateur at annihilating suitors," Weir asserted, feeling more and more able to cope with Takshan Pasha and the whole world, as the blood bounded momentarily more strongly through his veins.

"I think you will not find him at all inefficient, if he learns that you have escaped from the prison. You may be put where none of us can ever see you again, if you do not flee at once."

Weir picked up his wine glass and critically examined its contents. It did not look nearly so full of sunshine as it had a minute before.

"Can't you go aboard your yacht and steal away to-night?" she asked.

"I could, if only Rhas—the lady in question was on it too," he quickly corrected himself. "As it is, I shall have to stay."

"But do you mean that you would endanger your life—and it may be hers too—by still trying—" she began, as angrily as a woman of her perfect breeding could permit herself to be to a guest who was at her table.

He interrupted her, and now his tone was sterner than hers, and sad with the sadness of true love. "I

haven't told you the worst of it. The night after I was thrown into prison, she was to have run away from home and met me at the Bridge of Galata. If she did—" In spite of the servants, his head sank forward on his hands. Instantly, however, he roused himself. "I am only in hope—indeed, it seems the only possible course—that when she found I was not there, she returned home. She may suffer for it—she must think unspeakable things of me—but she is safe in that case. So you see," he ended simply, "why it is that I cannot go away until I am absolutely sure that no harm has come to the poor girl."

"But I told you we sent her flowers. She is surely safe at home, and you must leave Constantinople at once."

"My dear lady, I owe you an apology. I find I have misled you on one point. Now that I know she is safe, nothing could induce me to run away, after all."

The look of dogged resolution that underlay his smile told his hearer that on this point she need expend no breath in argument. For an instant wrath at his obstinacy blazed within her. Then the true woman in her came forth to meet the true manhood in him.

"And I will help you!" she cried admiringly, though she could not help knowing that this incurred the danger of banishment for herself and all the members of her family.

Across the *kataif*, most delicious of Turkish confections, they clasped hands, the American bending



She Listened to Him Gravely to the End.

the American, she repeated in a ruminating tone, "Therapia," and Weir felt himself flushing in spite of himself.

Yet he looked her straight in the eyes. "You needn't be guessing," he said; "I am going to tell you all about it."

If this afforded Madame Mavrocorthato any satisfaction, she gave no sign. "How did you get into prison?" she asked.

"I dived when the boat was upset, and got ashore before them. I lost my revolver in the water—had to let it go, it weighed too much—and took to my heels as soon as I got to land. They ran after me, yelling to beat the band. I suppose they said 'Stop thief!' for some *zaptiés* that I was making for thumped me on the head with the butt of a gun—and that was all I knew till I came to myself in prison."

"You poor boy!" Madame Mavrocorthato gave him the womanly sympathy that under certain conditions seems sweeter than anything else in the world.

Weir almost lost his composure under it, and to relieve the tension went on lightly. "Being in prison here in Turkey isn't what it's cracked up to be. They couldn't understand a word I said. I hadn't a cent to bribe them; and once when I tried to knock the jailer down and escape, they gave me a pretty bad beating."

The butler passed Weir some fruit; and when he showed by his ability to make a choice between the different kinds that food had been put back to